

Q&A with Pervez Hoodbhoy, professor of physics at Quaid-e-Azam University.

1. How do you look at the current incidents of violence by IJT in Peshawar University and now Punjab University?

The IJT is really the university Taliban. They carry weapons on campus, move in groups, enforce behavioral restrictions, and have a *shura*. Punjab University has been in the grip of these fascistic thugs for decades. They terrorize students and faculty, physically injure them, and even murder. The state passively tolerates them and, even when it takes some action, it is never enough to remove this cancerous growth. Religious extremists rule other Pakistani campuses as well. Recently the IJT killed a student at Peshawar University because he was listening to music. But let us not forget that secular political parties like the PPP were also less than responsible in the 1970's. Although they were not quite as violent as the Islamists, they also violated laws and ethical responsibilities for the sake of power.

2. What, in your personal view, ought to be the purpose/objectives of the student unions, assuming that you support the idea of students union? Do you agree that student unions create leaders for tomorrow?

I absolutely agree. We must have unions. Young people are idealists – in fact, there is no other way for them unless they are brain dead. They naturally dream of what a good society is, meaning a society that is better than that inherited from their elders. We must have faith in the young, educated people of our society. So, I feel that student unions must be restored and student representatives should be elected by popular vote. How else can Pakistan produce its next generation of political leaders? Are we forever doomed to being ruled by military usurpers and dynastic rulers? Even under the British Raj, there were student unions. Why not now? If students in India can successfully study and become world-renowned professionals, as well as unionize and fully engage in national and international political issues, then surely Pakistani students can do this just as well. Else we must admit to being an inferior people.

3. Should the unions be organised on non-party basis?

For now, yes. In principle there is no harm in students having allegiance to any political party. But given the tradition of violence on campuses, it is necessary to move cautiously. Once student unions show that they can operate responsibly, then I would say that it is a good thing to have national politics represented on campus. On Indian campuses, this is indeed the case. There you will find various communist parties, Congress, and BJP. They sometimes fight, but not very viciously.

4. How do you explain the element of violence in student politics? What are its historical roots?

There is a high level of violence in our society, and students are no different from people on the street in this regard. Just open a daily newspaper and you will see shocking news of violence against women and children, kidnappings, arson, rape, thieves being caught and bludgeoned to death or burnt alive, etc. This is a society that has become extremely intolerant, not just in religious affairs but also in terms of how we relate to each other. People do not see effective rule of law and so they take the law into their own hands. This is a major failing of the state and its institutions.

5. You've been associated with an institution where violence has been minimal. But do you have any suggestions – for the political parties, college administration and the students – to make the educational institutions free of violence without being depoliticized?

Well, Quaid-e-Azam University has seen its share of ethnic violence and I would not call it insignificant at all. But this violence was basically because of the frustration of students at the condition of their hostels, poor living conditions, and the overbearing attitude of the administrative apparatus. By giving students a say in how their lives are run, some of the frustration can be dispensed with. I certainly do not want to depoliticize students but we must move slowly. Before a full restoration of student unions, the government should allow and encourage limited activities such as disaster relief activities, community work, science popularization by students, etc. This first step must not be the last one, and we must move to restore unions as rapidly as circumstances allow. Restoration must hinge on a clear code of ethics that specifically abjures physical violence, and specifies immediate penalties, including immediate expulsion of students if these are violated, irrespective of political orientation.

6. What is the role of a teacher in student politics?

There are teachers who do little academic work but are fully engaged in student politics, often inciting them against their colleagues and other students. Fortunately we do not have this at QAU, but I am aware that it frequently happens on many public university campuses.

7. A large part of the education is in the hands of private sector which does not allow union activity of any kind. What kind of society and individuals is this system going to produce?

Actually the private sector higher education is only a small fraction of the total. Nevertheless, if present growth rates are maintained, it could become significant in the future and so this question is important. Student unions at private institutions would be

seen as a danger by the owners because they could raise issues that concern students collectively. So questions of high fees, poor facilities, bad teachers, etc. could be a potential embarrassment. But this is exactly why we should have unions in private institutions as well! In my opinion, the HEC should make it mandatory for all universities and colleges, whether in the public or private sector, to obey the same set of rules. In particular, unions must be allowed everywhere, subject to the restrictions discussed above.